

**Statement of Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Human Rights in Putin's Russia
Thursday, May 20, 2004**

Welcome to this Helsinki Commission hearing on "Human Rights in Putin's Russia" the latest in a series of hearings and briefings on developments in the Russian Federation. We have timed today's hearing in anticipation of President Putin's upcoming visit to the United States for the G-8 Summit, hosted by President Bush in Georgia.

Russia has made huge strides in democratic progress, human rights, civil liberties, and press freedom since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, since President Putin's ascent to power, influential elements in his government appear determined to reverse Russia's direction and institute authoritarian policies. Some close to Putin have euphemistically described the situation as "managed democracy."

As former head of the Russian domestic security service, the FSB, Mr. Putin is increasingly relying on the "security-intelligence complex" to run Russia. One academic specialist has determined that the proportion of former intelligence, military, police or prosecutorial personnel in the Kremlin's power structure has increased from about 5 percent under Mr. Gorbachev to nearly 60 percent under Putin.

One of the results has been what human rights activists are calling "spy mania," whereby academics and environmentalists have been accused of collaborating with Western intelligence agencies on the basis of questionable evidence and procedures. This week, I received a letter from several prominent Russian human rights activists including Lyuda Alexeeva, Elena Bonner, Sergei Kovalev and others, in which they state that the fabrication by the FSB of treason cases has become "a routine occurrence." The text of the letter will be included in the record.

Yesterday we learned that one attorney and former KGB officer mentioned in the letter, Mikhail Trepashkin has been sentenced to four years hard labor by a Moscow military court. Mr. Trepashkin was investigating what he claimed was a link between the FSB and a series of apartment bombings in 1999 that the government blamed on Chechen rebels. However, a week before he was scheduled to present his evidence in court, he was arrested and charged with illegal firearms possession and divulging state secrets.

Last fall the Commission held a hearing on Chechnya with compelling testimony about the continued brutality there. The security environment for Chechens and IDPs in neighboring provinces remains grim. While they await next Monday's anticipated decision on the recent court appeal, the Moscow local community of Jehovah's Witnesses faces the threat of liquidation. If the ruling stands, religious minorities throughout Russia have every reason to be concerned they could be next. Anti-Semitism, as in many countries, is a lingering threat, and we hope authorities at all levels will remain vigilant and denounce these acts and vigorously prosecute the perpetrators.

Outwardly, Russia exhibits the attributes of a democracy. It is probable that Mr. Putin would have been elected in free and fair presidential elections last March, but we'll never know. Although Election Day went smoothly, pro-Putin media bias and so-called "administrative resources" made sure no one went to bed wondering who would win. A close reading of the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices shows that victories for civil liberties and human rights do occur occasionally. President Putin himself has rejected parliamentary initiatives that would have further restricted freedom of the press and assembly, and even appointed respected former Duma member Vladimir Lukin as Human Rights Ombudsman.

The Putin Administration has worked effectively with Russian NGOs to combat the human scourge of trafficking and certainly is cooperating with the United States in the war against international terrorism.

But, when Putin joins his G-8 colleagues next month, he will be conferring with world leaders whose governments do not arrest businessmen or seize their assets when they become politically inconvenient or accuse environmentalists of working for foreign intelligence agencies. Instead, the thugs who trashed an exhibit at the Sakharov Museum are escaping prosecution, while the museum director (Yuri Samodurov) and his colleagues face charges. Russia needs rule of law, civil liberties, and conscientious leadership, not another gendarme in the Kremlin.

As we examine the situation on the eve of the G-8 Summit, our witnesses today are uniquely qualified to look at Russia from a human rights perspective.

I look forward to their testimony and we will have questions to follow.